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ABSTRACT

Evaluating current rural development research, the paper covers 6 major areas: (1) the nature and purpose of research; (2) circumstances related to rural development that require careful attention; (3) observations on rural development "disorganization" as an "outsider" might view the situation; (4) an opinion about the focus rural development research should take; (5) constructive suggestions as to why needs in rural development research are not being met; and (6) a suggested approach for rural development research. One of the major gaps in rural development research seems to be the lack of problem definition. The current numerous agencies, research documents, and researchers involved in the rural development effort are too complex to allow for an organized approach. If the rural development effort is to produce the desired results, the economist's approach, which appeals for a study of the resources of the rural community to analyze the alternatives open for economic development and to make recommendations on public policy at the local, state, and national levels, must assume much greater importance, and rural development researchers must be more clearly attuned to needs. Agricultural economists should direct their attention to research designed to provide information which will speed up rural economic development, providing jobs and income. (KM)

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH UNDER SCRUTINY*

By

Fred H. Tyner**

Second thoughts about the assigned title of this paper (Rural Development Research-One Perspective) prompted me to change it -- there is a not too subtle implication that the "one perspective" may not be the correct perspective. Also, I had envisioned using the shotgun approach -- assimilating a number of perspectives attributable to others into my own -- and at least attempting not to miss the target all together. However, such would be a rather placid and noncontroversial approach to the topic. I have a strong feeling that such an approach would be extremely inappropriate. Consequently, I propose to confront the topic of rural development research more directly, scrutinizing it as closely as possible, and attempting to make a contribution to a better understanding of the problems facing rural development researchers and those concerned with action programs in "rural development."

In keeping with the principle of previewing the main areas to be covered, the paper is outlined briefly as follows:

1. For any beginning graduate students in the audience, a word about the nature and purpose of research.

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2. To dispel the notion that the first area of discussion was irrelevant, discussion of some circumstances related to rural development that require careful attention; i.e., that may make rural development research a special case.

3. Observations on rural development "disorganization" as an "outsider" might view the situation.

4. An opinion as to the focus rural development research should take.

5. A presentation of some hopefully constructive suggestions regarding why needs in rural development research are not being met.

6. A suggested approach for rural development research.

7. Concluding remarks.

One always hopes that a speaker will tell (directly) how the listener should proceed -- or at least illustrate by ludicrous example how not to proceed. I am too modest to believe that I will be able to give you a prescription that will enable you to adequately evaluate other research or to plan your own research program in the most optimal manner. It is my intention, however, to propose questions and suggest answers that will cause you to consider rural development research in a more critical manner. And, to borrow a phrase, we all need to be more "critical lovers" rather than "uncritical lovers."

Nature and Purpose of Research

What is research? Very simply it is the searching out of answers to questions -- a gathering of evidence to support common sense notions. More

rigorously, it is the process of adding to the body of knowledge that constitutes a part of science. If the majority of man's occupation is concerned with decisions regarding the allocation of scarce resources among competing ends, then a body of knowledge from which to make these decisions is essential. Because this body of knowledge will not be useful if it is static, it is necessary that this body be added to, that old and outmoded ideas be rejected, and that new concepts be developed. Most of my discussion this afternoon (especially regarding research needs) will focus on research that is intended to be used directly or indirectly for decision making (applied research rather than basic or pure research).

Research has two other dimensions; i.e., positive versus normative. Positive research can be distinguished from normative in that answers derived are potentially independent of the ideologies or ethical values of the research worker. However, just because "what is" or "will be" questions can be answered objectively is no assurance that they <u>will</u> be answered objectively in research processes. One's ideology generates his interest in particular phenomena for investigation and influences his interpretation of observations. And the complexity of the social world, coupled with our limited understanding of it, often limits the use of certain objective procedures in research and encourages or requires the use of other methods. We can, therefore, never be sure about the degree to which the researcher's ideologies result in biased research results.1/

1/ See [9] for a more complete discussion.

The role of agricultural economics research in emphasizing the positive approach has been well discussed in the literature of the profession. Thus, a second requirement for the research under consideration is that of being positive or conditionally normative (what could be, given a certain set of constraints).

One further general remark about research needs to be made. A description of "what is" or "was" is insufficient without explaining "why". Although ideas about causal ordering of phenomena are prerequisite to securing facts relevant to describing what is or was, "... much of (rural development) research apparently has been fact-gathering insufficiently guided by meaningful conceptual frameworks, hypotheses, and purposes." [9, p. 15].

It is not my intent to develop such an unsupported conclusion and drop it. Although I have not attempted to develop a logical argument that rural development research has not been guided by meaningful conceptual frameworks, hypotheses, and purposes, I find such a conclusion a plausible explanation for currently voiced dissatisfaction with past and current rural development research. It is also a leading and intriguing hypothesis. If the hypothesis is in fact true, what are the reasons?

Is Rural Development A Special Case?

The logical development of discussion regarding a particular research subject area entails defining the subject area. Rural development has been defined in numerous and conflicting ways. Exposure to these multitudinous ideas of what rural development is should make it clear that research progress is contingent on selection of an objective definition.

Rural development has been characterized as being economic development, community development, natural resource development, human development, or any one of a number of other things depending on the focus of the defining entity. In contrast to arriving at a definition for farm management research, for example, defining rural development seems to be an almost insurmountable task. Because of the different perspectives, the different levels of human activity involved, and the different definitions that have been advanced for rural development, one could argue convincingly that rural development is indeed a special case.

But, it need not be. If one makes a decision to adopt a specific objective definition for rural development he can avoid floundering ineffectively amongst the myriad of definitions. The USDA Regulations for Programs under Title V of the Rural Development Act of 1972 interpret the overriding purpose of rural development as "to encourage and speed economic growth in rural areas, to provide for jobs and income required to support better community facilities and services, to improve the quality of rural life, and to do so on a self earned, self-sustaining basis." My belief is that agricultural economists should direct their attention to research designed to provide information which will speed up economic growth in rural areas, providing the jobs and income which are necessary to support people in rural areas. Adequate economic activity will allow them to develop better community facilities and services. This, to me, provides an objective approach to that otherwise elusive goal of "improving the quality of life in rural areas."

Organization or Disorganization for Rural Development?

This next venture goes somewhat beyond the bounds of a strictly research orientation, but I think that we ought to consider whether or not the rural development effort can be categorized as organized or whether its most distinguishing feature is disorganization. Part of any disorganization that exists is highly correlated with the inability of all involved to arrive at a satisfactory single definition of rural development and a failure to achieve an understanding or an agreement as to what the needs of rural development are. There seems to have been a compulsive attitude developed that rural development is to be all things for all people. No wonder it is difficult to get a handle on the problem.

I have not attempted to develop a comprehensive list or ordering of individuals or agencies or chronological periods in rural development. However, I think the following examples will be sufficiently illustrative of the agencies, regulations, statements of need, and exhortations for accomplishments that are characteristic of the "rural development effort." Agencies involved in the rural development effort include Farmers Home Administration; Rural Electrification Administration; Soil Conservation Service; Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service; the Rural Development Service; various other agencies of the US Department of Agriculture; Department of Health, Education and Welfare; and others. Legislation concerned with rural development includes the Rural Development Program of 1955; the Rural Areas Development Program of 1961; the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961; the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962; the Vocational Education Act of 1963; the Economic Opportunity Act of

1964; the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965; the Rural Community Development Service formed in 1965; the Agricultural Act of 1970; and the Rural Development Act of 1972.

Statements of needs and exhortations for accomplishments have either been included in or are the primary focus of such documents as: A National Program of Research for Rural Development and Family Living [2], Guidelines for Research in Rural Development and Criteria to be Considered in the Selection of Centers of Excellence [13], Suggestions for Research Emphasis in Rural Development in the South [30], Rural Development (With Suggestions for Research Content) [26], Current Program and Progress Report of the Economic Development Division [11], Title IX of the Agricultural Act of 1970, The People Left Behind [23], Rural People in the American Economy [27], Rural Poverty in the United States [22], Food and Fiber for the Future [21], the Rural Development Act of 1972, and numerous others. On top of this we have researchers in the various disciplines, extension workers, rural development centers, state rural development committees, state rural development advisory councils, planning and development districts, economic development districts, councils of government, resource conservation and development districts (These last four totaled 935 in the U.S. in 1972), multi-county development groups, local development groups, etc. If this constitutes an "organized" approach, it is much too complex for me to comprehend. Surely it is a bewildering phenomenon to people in rural areas who feel the need for more jobs, higher incomes, and more adequate community services.

In addition to the diversity of effort noted above, the rural development approach on a national scale has been characterized by a paucity of funding scattered among pilot projects, agencies, and various other groups and bodies, to demonstrate "what rural development is and how it can be accomplished."

The irony of the situation to me is that (1) there is not enough money to do this for every community or every individual that needs some "development", (2) the mixture of approaches that have been and continue to be undertaken in pilot programs or at local levels have an excellent chance of being below the average level of the current economic research available, (3) we stand to find out from this effort a great deal we already know, and (4) we eventually must come to recognize that the scarce resources we have for rural development should have been allocated where the marginal returns are greatest, (i.e., in building up the mobility of the population). This suggests that neither will the problems of the city be resolved through a backdoor (rural development) approach nor will the goals of rural development be achieved.

What Focus Should Rural Development Research Take?

I found in the literature [24, p. 2] a description of the rural development dream: "The answer to the problem of rural migration and the solution to the central city plagues are as close by as America's countryside." Maybe this is too utopian an outlook -- explaining the reason for lack of success in previous so-called rural development efforts. Further, (p. 9) "The first function for the Council of Rural Affairs should be to establish appropriate goals, policies, and priorities for the economic and social development of rural countryside America." Whose responsibility indeed is this?

Another kind of inconsistency that is brought forth in the same report (p. 6) follows: "Job development through private industry is the most effective rural development program. And the activities of rural development should be directed toward this goal." Then later (p. 48) "The increasing

responsibilities of the Extension Service in rural development should be backed up with research data in response to the new questions and pressing problems encountered by Extension. These are more human and social in nature than the traditional technical and commodity oriented questions handled by land grant institutions." No wonder many of us are confused as to the proper areas to emphasize.

Jansma and Day [18, p. 282] state that: "Research priorities, assuming our goal is improving the socio-economic well-being of people in rural areas, should be oriented toward providing adequate training and other mobility aids for the people who wish to move to more urban areas and to providing opportunities and adequate facilities for those who remain in rural areas." This statement, in which I strongly concur, cannot be reconciled with my understanding of the intent of the Rural Development Act of 1972.

A general guide to research needs was stated by Heady [14, pp. 50-51] as follows: "The challenging task in rural community development is to identify the nature, location, and extent of inequities falling on rural communities and on various population strata in them; then to evaluate and provide alternative means for alleviating or redressing these inequities." The most clear cut dimension of the rural development problem is assisting the decision maker who has the capability through his own initiative and resources to do something about his problems. The more complex dimensions require policy legislation, funds, and programs at national and state levels.

While it's not new it's refreshing to look back and see that some old advice is still appropriate. Bishop [5, p. 999] stated "Our preoccupation with the problems of the farm firm has resulted in little or no attention to economic problems that are much more important to the majority of the rural population."

The most concise suggestion I can make in dealing with this problem is to adopt an economic development approach to provide for some clarification of issues and strengthen the framework for research directions and objectives.

Why Aren't Rural Development Research Needs Being Met?

Part of the answer to this question is interspersed through all the above discussion. Inability to define the problem succinctly is a major problem. Inability to state a comprehensive view of the problem so that small but practical pieces could be fitted together is another problem. There seem to be some others, as suggested below.

Out methods of problem recognition have been (1) a felt need of the individual or society, (2) a gap between the achievement and the goal of the individual or society, (3) a deviation from optimum as defined by theory, and (4) an intellectual difficulty felt by the researcher. Often problems as stated by the general public and by many social scientists have dealt with the symptoms of problems rather than the basic causes of the uncertain or unsatisfactory situations. [17, p. 22]

Over the years we have been criticized for too much emphasis on the individual farmer or too much focus on a particular resource (such as land). It has been said that we have ignored the fact that rural development is both economic and social development -- that a unit of decision cannot be a farm firm but must be a group of some kind. The resources that have been investigated have not been those associated with human capital or community capital or social capital. [20, p. 1049]. Most importantly, we in rural development work "have devoted far too much attention to defining areas in terms of needs rather than in terms of potentials for development. [19, p. 1058].

"Our social programs are designed to adjust poor people rather than the conditions that make people poor." [10, p. 737].

"Policy formulation has been all but buried in a proliferation of narrow categorical programs." [12, p. 252]. It might be more appropriate to paraphrase this for the current situation as "Implementation of action programs has been all but buried under a proliferation of broad and all-encompassing objectives."

"To do everything is to do nothing." [4, p. 135].

I could spend most of my allotted time just reading a list of articles, memoranda, reports, etc. that have been written in the last 10 years and which delineate research needs in rural development. Maybe we don't read what each other writes--or is there some other reason for the obvious inability to clarify this area?

One criticism of rural development research which I couldn't pass up is stated as follows: "Analysis of specific land grant college research projects on rural people and places reveals the commitment to these needs is even less than it appears on the surface. The low percentage of scientific man years, the pitiful departmental budgets, and the handful of projects do not begin to plumb the depths of the bankruptcy that exists within this research." [15, p. 53]. A more meaningful and insightful criticism from the same source states "Research on people and places in rural America is not geared to action. Projects tend to be irrelevant studies of characteristics and they tend to stem more from curiosity than a desire to change conditions." [15, p. 55]. To me this criticism has basis in fact--and is inextricably tied to lack of identification of the research audience and extension clientele.

Perhaps there is a more basic reason for some of the difficulties surrounding rural development research, especially as it relates to the development of rural human resources. What does economic theory have to contribute to this situation? We have equilibrium models for the resource allocation, investment, and consumption processes based on assumptions of perfect knowledge, mobility and free exit-entry. Rural people -- as a productive resource and in homogeneous groupings -- would flow among alternative employment possibilities until both their marginal value products and returns were equal." [29, p. 200]. What are the departures from these theoretical concepts that affect the real situation? It would be helpful to consider the areas in which the assumptions on which this equilibrium is reached are not met. Models can provide little insight into decisions about allocation of resources or investment generated through the public since predictions from these models arise from aggregations of individual decisions about their own optimizing endeavors. Public policy-making processes of representative government result in decisions about investment that affect the productivity of the rural citizenry, their consumer behavior, and their participation in policy making itself. The investment processes that we may be concerned with are public, those embodied in equilibrium theory and the models that we deal with are intrinsicly private. In theoretical models, supply and demand are recorded by an infinite aggregation of private and individual choices. In the public process an infinite array of individual choices by participants also comes into play. However, the resolution is not through summation but in accommodation, conciliation, or compromise among the choices [29, p. 203].2/

2/ In the same vein, Willis and Engel [31, p. 3] state that "The aggregation theories envision society selecting policies on a democratic basis where each member casts a vote. This contrasts rather sharply, of course, with observed practices in contemporary societies in which the policy decision making is generally delegated to a small number of decision makers.

The major problem in adapting the aggregated micro theoretical models to provide information for macro problems is that we are dealing with two different kinds of resources. One is private -- under the control of a specific decision making body or an individual decision maker. Allocation of resources is dictated by conventional micro economic theory. That is, maximizing or minimizing principles apply and objectives are normally quantitatively defined. The second type of resource is public. It either may be allocated by legislation for rather categorical purposes where allocation is from the top down, or it may be at rather loose ends -- available for allocation but the means for acquisition of such resources by the individual or group is unclear. There exists a need for education, clarification of available resources, coordination of efforts, identification of resources and the functions they can perform, and determination of access to resources and measures of benefits to the public in general, to selected public sub-groups, and to the private sector.

Why have agricultural economists not devoted more research resources to the study of the allocation of public resources; that is, a more comprehensive analysis of structural changes in rural communities and of public policies relating to the location of economic activity and distribution of benefits of public programs? It may be that [5, p. 1005], "our inability to understand what is going on in rural America stems from the fact that we have been unwilling to devote the necessary research resources to the structural problems to gain a comprehensive understanding of them."

A Suggested Approach in Rural Development Research

What are the needs in rural development research? Are we meeting these needs or are we gearing up to meet them? Have we been doing something called rural development research that is not rural development research, or that should be done under some other name, or some other group should be doing?

Perhaps we should be more circumspect in selection of our research areas. More specifically, we should ask ourselves "Who are the decision makers who most need data? What data do they need; and in what contexts?" [4, p. 135] With regard to clientele, Brannen states [7, p. 3]: In dealing with the problems of rural development we can no longer afford to think in terms of our clientele as consisting only (or even primarily) of farmers." Four principal categories of clientele of extension workers are defined by Cavender [8, p. 110] as: 1) citizens groups involved in making and implementing decisions that relate to community improvement and development, 2) key local citizens who influence or make decisions relevant to the community; 3) public officials who are responsible to the citizens for administering public policy and for programs of economic and social progress; and 4) groups such as development authorities, planning commissions, and private firms engaged in planning community development activities.

Jim Hildreth's clear-cut example of the heterogeneity of the research audience identifies that audience at national, state, and community levels in both public and private categories as follows: national public (congress and executive branch), national private (national organizations and firms), state public (legislators and government officials), state private (state organizations and firms), community public (local government), and community private (local organizations and firms, individuals, and families)

[16, pp. 156-157].

What data or research results do these clients need? Here I find myself at a loss to provide a comprehensive list of needs and maintain the requisite brevity. In general then, I will say that the tax paying public needs answers to current problems. To say to a client that basic research is underway which should be of help "down the road" seems clearly inappropriate.

If jobs and incomes are to be generated in rural areas, then clients need to know what kinds of industry would be best (or even good), the fiscal impact of industrialization on the community, whether to opt for local development or depend on commuting to a "growth center", prescriptively-oriented analyses of the ties between provision of services and interactions with goods-producing sectors, income and employment effects of various industry sectors, income and employment effects of alternative tax policies, etc.

Answers to two important questions are essential for planning for needed community services in rural areas: (1) what is the expected number and spatial distribution of jobs and people in rural areas during future time periods? (2) What is the expected form and quality of community services that will be desired over a planning period? [28, p. 2]. Input to determine "adequate" services will require development of conceptual frameworks for local decision-makers to use in deciding what expenditure of limited funds represents the best investment for their community. And, although planning in rural areas must deal with the same variables used in SMSA's, the problem is complicated because of sparse population and a

multitude of local government bodies. [28, p. 3]. Because a number of counties may be required to muster a population large enough to support certain desired services, research to facilitate coordination and organization for efficiency is suggested.

Research to establish the needs for and means of providing better educations, proper vocational training, adequacy of nutrition and health care, and at least moderate social and cultural activities is obviously called for.

I would like to quote at length from a statement by U.S. Congressman Bill Alexander[3/] of Arkansas: First, regarding specific needs "I agree that when you are working with a priority item list including communications, comprehensive planning, education, job development, transportation networks, and water and waste disposal system projects, then recreation would have to be placed lower on the list than some of the others. But, I would emphasize that I regard all these areas of work as integral parts of comprehensive community development in nonmetropolitan areas."

"Second, I would agree that more research is needed into the needs, effects, and practical solutions of the development problems plaguing the countryside, but I would again point out that the test of research is in its practical use in achieving our objectives. It is time, I believe, that research and practical application be undertaken concurrently. The Congress is going to want to see tangible results from the use of Title V funds."

3/ Chairman, House Subcommittee on Family Farms and Rural Development.

"I recognize that there is a philosophical conflict, in the minds of some researchers, about what research actually is. I do not intend to join that discussion in this letter except to say I believe the test of and justification for research is the capability of its results for translation into useful, workable, and rational solutions to community and regional development problems of the countryside." [1].

We certainly have an impressive reservoir of capabilities for meeting these research needs. In addition to appropriate micro economic theory for producer and consumer decisions, we have theoretical approaches to rural development exemplified in trade theory, location theory, basic resource theory, staple or export-base theory, internal and external combustion theory, and others. Quantitative tools for rural development research include such things as shift analysis, economic base analysis, intersectoral input-output analysis, interregional intersectoral input-output analysis, econometric models, simulation models, spatial programming, activity analysis, and others which provide general guidelines for decision making. [See 3 and 6]. There appears to be a necessity for research and extension to work together to refine the research generated down to a point where it can be applied in individual cases, with the extension workers directing action programs where the greatest development potential appears to exist.

Although it sounds very cynical, the distressing fact about most discussions of rural development research needs, to me, is that the prescription usually is (1) put together a core of researchers to work on current problems using research data that are already available, (2) put together interdisciplinary groups or teams to work on intermediate and long run problems, and (3) continue with fundamental discipline-oriented

research. In other words, the solution appears to be to get organized for rural development research on the basis of length of run. This seems to ignore the essential question: "What are the problems?"

I do believe we have missed some excellent opportunities in the past, through not fully utilizing the research results we have generated. Continued dependence on research endeavors that are highly general -- without serious attempts to provide specific results -- will not satisfy the needs of people in rural areas. Information simply will not be able to filter down to the decision making levels where direction is urgently needed.

We should also be aware of major changes in overall rural development policy. For example, the philosophy existent before the Rural Development Act of 1972 might be described as "(1) doing the very best job possible on those farms that have adequate resources to support farm families and (2) making possible a transfer or combination of resources on those farms that have inadequate resources to support farm families." [19, p. 1059].

How large a role will be played by the implications of the Rural Development Act of 1972 for land resettlement? Ordinarily we would suppose that, aside from immobility and depressed areas, people would be best off living wherever they wanted to. [29, p. 198]. "Although the rural community is one of the instruments through which human resources are developed it is not the end product of concern, rather people are the crucial issue, an adequate understanding of which will help channel attention to the community, various institutions, and other factors that affect their welfare." There appears to be much emphasis on "fixing people in rural areas in their present location." Why not work to increase economic opportunity in rural areas -- depending on people to locate in those viable rural areas that can

provide the economic opportunity to enable the provision of desired community facilities and services? The best alternative for some residents of rural areas with little potential can best be attained by increasing their mobility.

The usual approach of the economist, which has been to appeal for a study of the resources of the rural community to analyze the alternatives open for economic development and to make recommendations on public policy at the local, state and national levels [25, p. 231] must assume much greater importance, and rural development researchers be more clearly attuned to needs, if the rural development effort is to produce the desired results.

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